

APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY THEORY AND PRACTICE

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WHAT IS APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY?

A. Defining Appreciative Inquiry (AI)

1. Appreciative Inquiry as process and philosophy:

- **a process** for engaging people in building the kinds of families, communities, organizations and world they want to live in; and,
- **a practical daily philosophy**, that can guide our work with families, communities, and organizations based on the realization that what we learn from *what works and gives life is more effective and sustainable than what we learn from breakdowns and pathologies.*

2. Definitions:

- **Appreciate:** To value or admire highly; to perceive those things that give life (health, vitality, excellence) to living systems. To increase in value.
- **Inquire:** To search into, investigate; to seek for information by questioning. The act of exploration and discovery. To ask questions; to be open to seeing new potentials and possibilities.

THE PRINCIPLES OF AI

1. Are Principles Important?

While the 5-D Cycle for applying Appreciative Inquiry is presented here as a systematic approach to organization change, it is important to understand that variations on, or even alternatives to this model will inevitably emerge as each system takes the AI approach and makes it their own. Once grounded in the principles of AI, organizations inevitably become generative and creative, which leads to even more innovation in the use of AI itself.

In the original work of Appreciative Inquiry, there are 5 principles articulated: 1. Constructionist, 2. Anticipatory, 3. Simultaneity, 4. Poetic, and 5. Positive. Several authors have added other principles to this list, but the one that almost all agree is an overarching principle for this work is the principle of Wholeness. Following are brief descriptions of each of the principles.

2. The Overarching Principle of Wholeness:

Appreciative Inquiry, rooted as it is in that which is strong and positive, leads to a **"new manner of thinking."** AI unleashes the imagination and provides a process for human beings to join together and experience the idea that "Wholes precede parts!" as articulated in Peter Senge's book *Presence*.

Speaking of Albert Einstein, one writer noted: *"He marveled at magnetic fields, gravity, inertia and light beams. 'Something deeply hidden had to be behind things,' he said. He retained the ability to hold two thoughts in his mind simultaneously, to be puzzled when they conflicted and to delight when he saw an underlying unity."*

What if we could all do that? What if we could all realize that what we label dichotomous is caused by our limited ability to realize that what we see in parts is always some small piece of a larger whole, and that it is our choice about whether to see the part or to embrace the whole.

EXAMPLE: We want to play a game of football, a sport known for being highly competitive. So we go to an agreed upon location; we suit up in agreed upon gear; we locate an agreed upon ball; and we play a game by agreed upon rules and regulations.

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Is this a "competitive" process? Or a cooperative one? To have a football game, cooperation and competition are part of a whole, essential to the game's success.

Further, to understand "wholes" and realize that "wholes" precede parts, we might reflect that we are not born a piece at a time. We arrive in the world with everything attached to everything else. It is possible for us to learn to hold dichotomous ideas in our head at the same time (a process that Don Beck calls "second tier thinking" in Spiral Dynamics theory) and we can come to see the world anew. We can approach these seeming differences with an "ISN'T THAT INTERESTING!" approach in place of an "I DON'T AGREE WITH THAT" framework.

With Appreciative Inquiry, it becomes apparent that what we defined as "problems" can be resolved by looking forward toward a dreamed-of future rather than by looking backward to what was broken and needed fixing. It helps us understand that human systems are different from mechanical systems, and that the way forward is not by becoming the admired leader; rather, it is by empowering all of human kind to tap into their gifts and talents together "to create not just new worlds, but better worlds?" (David Cooperrider from the film: "Fusion of Strengths")

Appreciative Inquiry is all about "wholes:"

- Getting the whole system involved in imagining their preferred future
- Getting all voices in the system into the room

That is the challenge for an AI Consultant – to help organizations begin to understand the interconnectedness of every part of the organization and to see it as an interconnected whole.

3. The Five Original Principles:

1. **Constructionist Principle:** An understanding and acceptance of the **social constructionist stance** toward reality and social knowledge; i.e., that what we believe to be real in the world is created through our social discourse, through the conversations we have with each other that lead to agreement about how we will see the world, how we will behave, what we will accept as reality.

Knowledge and organizational destiny are interwoven; the way we know is fateful. Awareness of this concept enables change. We create what we can imagine.

The Constructionist Principle states that knowledge about an organization and the destiny of that organization are interwoven. To be effective leaders in any situation, we must be skilled in the art of understanding, reading, and analyzing organizations as living, human constructions. What we believe to be true about an organization, the way that we "know" it, will affect the way we act and the way we approach change in that system. The first task of any organization change process is Discovery – learning and making sense of what is believed and said about the system. Thus, the **way** we know *is* fateful.¹

2. **Poetic Principle:** A valuing of **story telling** as a way of gathering holistic information that includes not only facts, but also the feelings and affect that a person experiences and the recognition that stories (like all good poetry) can be told and interpreted about any aspect of an organization's existence.

An organization's past or present or future is an endless source of learning, inspiration, interpretation and possibility. We can inquire into anything and any living human organization.

The Poetic Principle acknowledges that human organizations are open books. An organization's story is constantly being co-authored by the people within the organization as well as by those outside who interact with it. The organization's past, present, and future are endless sources of learning, inspiration, or interpretation just as a good poem is open to endless interpretations. The important point is that we can study *any* topic related to human experience in *any* human system. We can inquire into the nature of alienation or the nature of joy. We can study moments of creativity and innovation, or moments of debilitating stress. We have a choice!

3. **Principle of Simultaneity:** A realization that **inquiry is change**; that the first question we ask is fateful in that the organization will turn its energy in the direction of that first question, whether positive or negative; and, as a result, the seeds of change are embedded in it.

Inquiry **is** change! The seeds of change are embedded in the first questions we ask.

The Principle of Simultaneity recognizes that inquiry and change are not separate moments, but are simultaneous. Inquiry is intervention. The seeds of change -- that is, the things people think and talk about, the things people discover and learn, and the things that inform dialogue and inspire images of the future -- are implicit in the very first questions we ask. One of *the* most impactful things a change agent does is to articulate questions. The questions we ask set the stage for what we "find", and what we "discover" creates the stories that lead to conversations about how the organization will construct its future.

4. **Anticipatory Principal.** The impact of anticipatory images; i.e., understanding that behavior and decisions about actions are based not only on what we were born with or learned from our environment, but also on what we anticipate, what we think or imagine will happen in the future.

Habits of the collective imagination, habits of the mind, habits of the heart guide images of the future. Images are relational, public property, dialogical.

The Anticipatory Principle says that the most important resource we have for generating constructive organizational change or improvement is our collective imagination and our discourse about the future. It is the image of the future that in fact guides the current behavior of any person or organization. Much like a movie projector on a screen, human systems are forever projecting ahead of themselves a horizon of expectation that brings the future powerfully into the present as a mobilizing agent. Organizations exist, in the final analysis, because people who govern and maintain them share some sort of shared discourse or projection about what the organization is, how it will function, and what it is likely to become.

5. **Positive Principle:** A belief that a **positive approach** to any issue is just as valid as a basis for learning and that it is just as contagious as a negative approach, which makes taking the positive stance an antidote to cynicism.

Positive affect is just as contagious as negative affect. There is power in positive questions; the affective side of transformation; the dynamic of hope. Positive and grounded inquiry is an antidote to cynicism.

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The Positive Principle: The Positive Principle grows out of years of experience with Appreciative Inquiry. Momentum for change requires large amounts of *positive affect and social bonding*—things like hope, inspiration, and sheer joy in creating with one another. AI demonstrates that the more positive the questions used to guide a group process or organizational change effort, the more long lasting and effective the change effort.ⁱⁱ Human beings and organizations move in the direction of what they inquire about. Wide spread inquiry into “empowerment” or “being the best organization in the field”, will have a whole different long term sustainable impact for positive action than a study into “low morale” or “process breakdowns” done with the idea that those conditions can be cured.

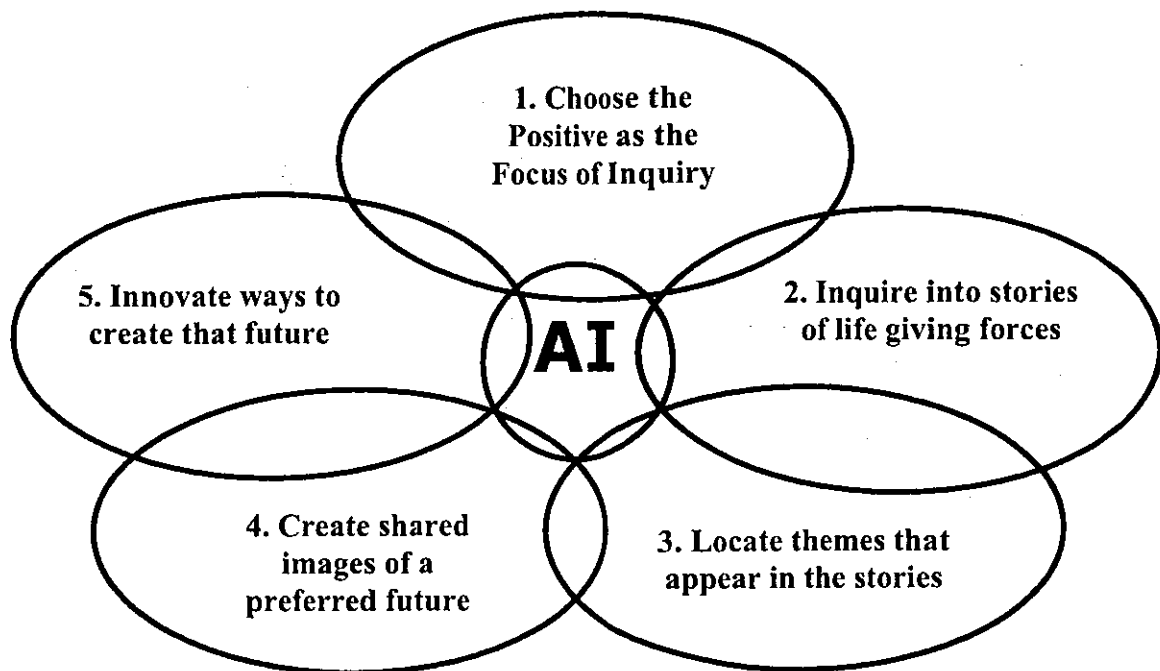
ⁱ Gergen, Kenneth. Realities and Relationships. Harvard University Press, 1995.

ⁱⁱ Bushe, G. and Coetzer, G. “Appreciative Inquiry As a Team-Development Intervention: A Controlled Experiment., Vol. 31, Journal Of Applied Behavioral Science, March, 1995, pp. 13.

The Core Processes of Appreciative Inquiry

The 5-D Cycle is a catchy set of terms – but people often ask, just what happens in each of those “D’s”? In answer to this question we have developed simpler language – which we call the five core processes:

The Core Processes of Appreciative Inquiry



OVERVIEW OF PHASES IN APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY

**1. AFFIRMATIVE TOPIC CHOICE
PREPARING FOR AN APPRECIATIVE PROCESS
(DEFINITION)**

**2. INQUIRY INTO "LIFE-GIVING" PROPERTIES
COLLECTING THE STORIES
Valuing the Best of What Is
(DISCOVERY)**

**3. AGREEING ON AND WRITING POSSIBILITY STATEMENTS
VISIONING THE IDEAL
Envisioning What Might Be
(DREAM)**

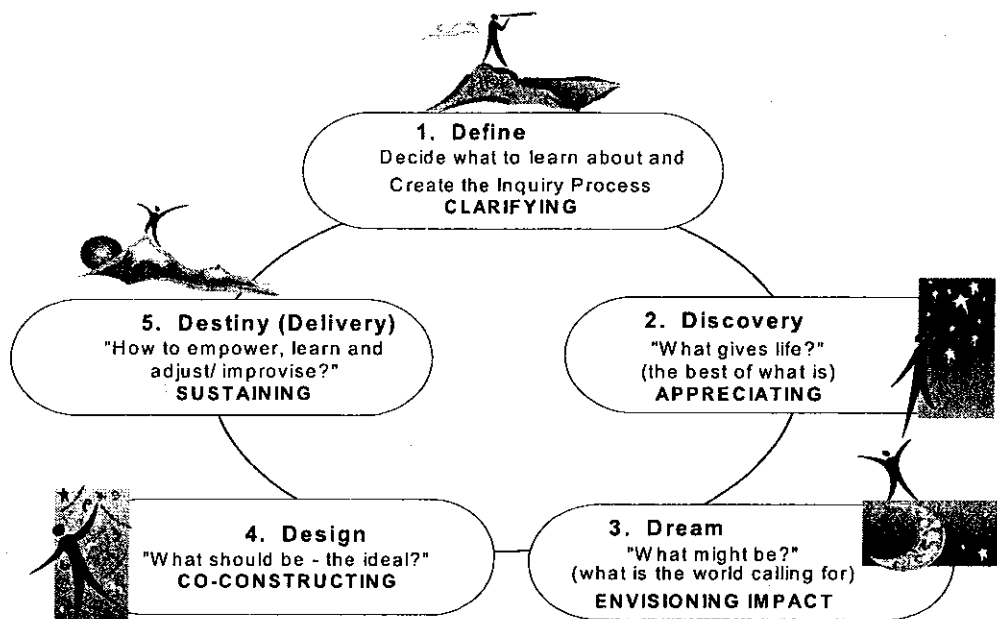
**4. ALIGNING VALUES, STRUCTURES AND PROCESSES WITH THE
IDEAL
GETTING EVERYONE INTO THE CONVERSATION
Dialoguing What Should Be
(DESIGN)**

**5. CO-CONSTRUCTING A SUSTAINABLE PREFERRED FUTURE
EMBRACING SYSTEM WIDE INNOVATION
Innovating What Will Be
(DELIVERY/DESTINY)**

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The 5-D Cycle

THE 5-D CYCLE OF APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY



DEFINE: Decide what to learn about and create the Inquiry Process

DISCOVER: Conduct an inquiry into the topic and assemble the stories and key ideas that come out of the inquiry.

DREAM: Generalize those discoveries into an image of how the organization would function if what you have discovered were fully alive in the present.

DESIGN: Develop ideas about the organization's socio-technical architecture when infused with what has been discovered.

DELIVER/DESTINY: Innovate/align the organization's socio-technical architecture with the Dream and the Design phases, AND build AI learning competencies into system.

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THE 5-D CYCLE

(See graphic on page 25)

DEFINITION PHASE: During this first phase, the AI process is defined and the process to be implemented is agreed upon by the consultant and the client. Together, they decide what the system wants to learn about and create an Inquiry Process that is appropriate to their organization. During this phase, a typical process includes (1) Introducing AI to the client; (2) Establishing a guidance and support structure within the client system; (3) Creating a customized interview guide for the inquiry process; (4) Creating a plan for the interview process.

DISCOVERY: in the Discovery phase, a group of people who have worked with the AI consultant to create the process and the interview guide conducts interviews. Once the interviews are completed, the group has dialogue about what they discovered, assemble the stories and key ideas that come out of the inquiry, and agree upon the major themes that emerge from the interviews.

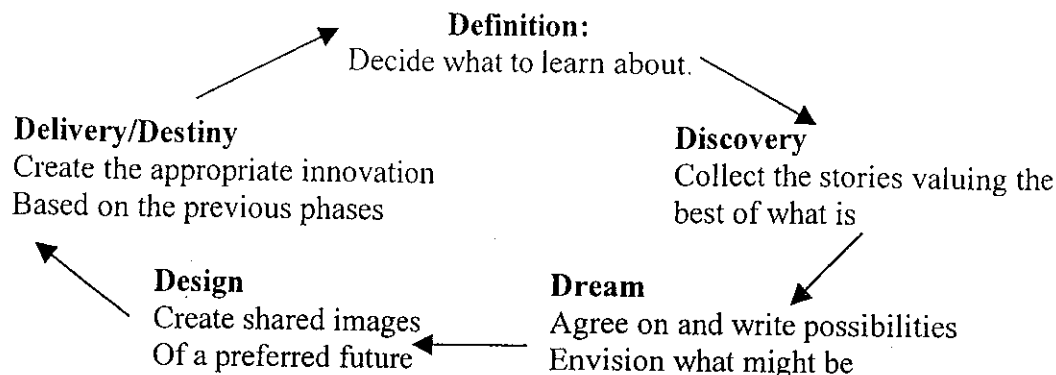
DREAM: Once the themes are identified, the group generalizes those themes into an image of how the organization would function if those key topics and ideas were fully alive in the organization in the present. The image is put into words that create a "macro provocative proposition" – a verbal description of the whole organization at its best.

DESIGN: Using the images and provocative propositions as a guide, the group develops ideas and images of how the organization could be structured (the organization's socio-technical architecture) to reflect the best of what has been discovered and created in the previous phases.

DELIVER/DESTINY: To complete the circle, the whole organization begins to innovate to align the organization's structure with the proposed socio-technical architecture that came out of the Dream and the Design phases. At the same time, this phase focuses on building AI learning competencies into the system so that the AI process is imbedded in the fabric of the organization and becomes "the way we do our work."

Summary of the 5 – D Appreciative Inquiry Cycle

Adapted by Mary Hoddy, Wisconsin Union, from "AI for Organization Change: A Workshop Resource Book", by Jane Magruder Watkins & Bernard Mohr



Definition Phase: During this first phase, the AI process is defined and the process to be implemented is agreed upon by the consultant and the client. Together, they decide what the system wants to learn about and create an Inquiry Process that is appropriate to their organization. During this phase, a typical process includes:

1. Introduce AI to the client (Chair, CEO, Executive Team, etc.)
2. Establish guidance and support structure within the organization (Training Department, Professional Development Committee, etc.)
3. Create a customized interview guide for the inquiry process
4. Create a plan for the interview process

Discovery Phase: In the Discovery phase, interviews are conducted with themes emerging from the interviews. A typical process includes:

1. Pairs interview each other for between 5 - 60 minutes each. Interviews include a story of things working at their best and 3 wishes that they have for the future.
2. Two – four pairs join to form a small group which identifies key themes or threads that emerged from the interviews.
3. Create a chart (for example on a flipchart) with all themes or threads. Combine or rewrite themes as they emerge from groups.
4. Create a scattergram with each person placing 3-4 dots on the theme with they are drawn to or are most import to them.
5. Dialogue on results of the scattergram, e.g. how what surprised participants and what it says about their organizations.

Themes	Dots
1.	* *
2.	* * *
3.	
4.	*

An alternative process includes:

1. Identify core group of interviewers
2. Interviewers conduct individual interviews with staff until all are interviewed. With a large group, initial interviews can train a second (or third) tier of interviewers who in turn interview all staff.
3. Interviewers meet to identify themes or key ideas that emerged from the interviews and create a grid and a process to make a scattergram.
4. All participants place 3 – 4 dots on the themes

Dream Phase: The dream phase challenges the status quo by envisioning a preferred future. Stake holders engage in possibility conversations about the organization's potential, its calling and the unique contribution it can make. To define and articulate the dreams, a typical process includes both "right-brain" and "left-brain" activities:

1. Each small group selects one of the theme that they feel energy around
2. Together they create a graphic representation of the preferred image. This can be as simple as using markers and flipchart paper, but it can also include colored paper, small toys, etc. The representation can also be a skit or song that captures the dream.
3. Groups then translate their image into language by creating a Provocative Proposition, which states in one sentence the essence of their dream in the present tense, as if it were already happening.
4. Each group shares their Graphic Representation and Provocative Proposition with large group.

Note: Macro Provocative Propositions apply to the organization as a whole. Micro Provocative Propositions apply to a discrete part or particular function of the organization.

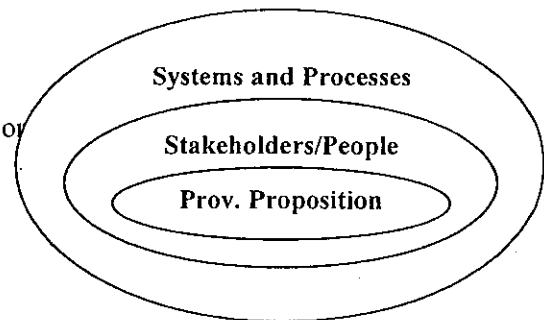
Design Phase: In the Design phase, we translate the Dream into language of the organization's social architecture – all the formal and informal structure that sustains the essence of the organization. Using the images and provocative propositions as a guide, the group begins to align the organization with the dream. Two typical approaches are:

Individual Action Approach

1. Each employee considers what part of the dream they want to bring to life.
2. Individuals make simple commitments, offers, and/or requests.
3. Individuals move their commitments to action.

Whole System Design Approach uses traditional and non-traditional Organizational Development models, such as:

1. Teams create a Goose Egg Framework to view stakeholders/people and systems/processes related to each Provocative Proposition.
2. Individuals, teams, or departments can move to traditional Organizational Development models to design.




Delivery/Destiny Phase: In the Delivery/Destiny Phase, the organization fleshes out, experiments with, and redesigns the innovations that it identified during the Design phase. Employees continue to work to identify, highlight, and expand on what is working well.


The main challenge that groups face during this stage is sustaining – and even magnifying – the inspiration that characterizes the earlier phases. We come from a “project mentality” that values clear starts and conclusions. But we are increasingly confronted with a world in which change does not occur during a separate time period, after which we get back to business as usual. Rather, change is now the very water in which we swim.


“Appreciative Inquiry: Igniting Transformative Action”, by Bernard Mohr, *The Systems Thinker*, 2/2001


Appreciative Inquiry Interviews

Tips for the Listener/Interviewer

-  You want to have the person share the vivid details of the story.
Be **genuinely curious** about their experiences, feelings and thoughts.

-  **Let the person tell their story**, do not tell yours or give opinions about the experience.

-  **Allow for silence** - sometimes we need time to think!

-  It is okay to **probe** for further information.
Some possible questions include:
 - Tell me more.
 - What caused you to feel that way?
 - How did it affect you?
 - What do you think was really making it work?
 - What was your contribution?

Dig deep when listening, **search for values and those things that matter** to the storyteller...

*"There is no greater power
than a community finding out what it cares about."*
Margaret Wheatley

Dealing With The Negative(s)

We are well trained to find the negative in things. We are "socially constructed" to see, identify and attempt to solve the "problems" that exist in any human system. So what to do when confronted with folks who just cannot seem to get past the negative/problems when doing an Appreciative Inquiry process?

Postpone

Make a verbal, and if appropriate written, note of what they have said and then come back to it later in the process. When people are authoring their wishes for the future of their organization is the best time to go back to this information. As the facilitator/interviewer, be sure you do actually get back to the information!

Listen!

If there is genuine passion and intensity about what they are saying, let them say it! As a facilitator you will get no where on the appreciative side if the focus of their energy is the negative(s) they just have to get off their chest. While this may mean wallowing through some organizational quick sand that is better than having it block the process and losing any capacity to be appreciative. Keep working to craft a caring and affirmative spirit.

Redirect and Broaden the Perspective

If there is less passion present attempt to redirect the conversation back to the affirmative. Paraphrase the problem(s) that have been raised and ask them to think of a time when this was NOT true, when things were working best. If the response is that this never happens, then broaden the perspective to situations outside of the system/organization in question - ask them to think about when it was working best anywhere, in any context.

Use The Negative Information

Anything that someone can find wrong with a system or situation stems from the absence of something they value in that system or situation. Turn the perspective on the situation to find out what, if present, would create the ideal conditions and/or organization given the problem or issue. For example, someone might comment, "There is no respect here for what the other things that might be going on in peoples' lives beside this work." As the facilitator/interviewer you might respond, "When you say that it means that you have some idea in your mind about how respect for the rest of someone's life outside of work might manifest itself. Can you tell me what that image is? How would this workplace be different if that level of respect were present?" If they continue to struggle use their negative information and try to reframe it yourself into a positive image. Every negative image is conditioned by an affirmative image!

*"...the agonies which are, have their origin
in the ecstasies which might have been."*

Edgar Allen Poe